

## **Talking Trash with SWALCO**

June 2022,

The staff at SWALCO receive lots of calls and emails every day from Lake County residents and businesses asking great questions about how to properly recycle or dispose of common household materials that they no longer need. Sometimes we receive calls from concerned residents alerting us that they observed their waste collector throwing the contents of their recycling cart into the trash truck. After gathering more details from the caller, we then follow up with the waste collector and the municipal management.

Sometimes we find it's just a case of mistaken identity. Such as when a waste collector uses a two-compartment collection truck, often referred to as a "One Pass" truck. These trucks are considered more efficient since they collect both trash and recyclables at the same time, reducing the need for two trucks. However, an onlooker could mistakenly think that recycling and trash are being combined at any given moment. Another cause for confusion can occur due to the waste collector using their collection trucks interchangeably. It is very common for the trash truck to look identical to the recycling truck. Regardless, SWALCO takes each call very seriously and investigates the matter to see if there was something more to what the caller observed.

In some instances, a waste collector has informed us that they have on occasion landfilled materials that were placed in a recycling cart because their customer improperly placed unacceptable or unrecognizable materials in the recycling cart. This includes cases where residents place recyclables in plastic bags. Just to be clear, recyclables should never be bagged. Regardless of how careful you are with preparing your materials for recycling, if you set recyclables out for pickup and they are in a plastic bag, there is a very high probability that the waste collector will refuse to accept the bagged materials for recycling.

Over the last few years, recycling has been the subject of a lot of media scrutiny. First, it was a decline in the value of recyclables caused mostly by the Chinese decision to ban the importation of recyclables into their country. Next came stories showing that in parts of the U.S. recyclables were being dumped in landfills or being shipped overseas only to be landfilled or burned. And most recently an easily remembered statistic has emerged claiming that only nine percent of plastics are recycled. So, it's no wonder that people are growing more and more suspicious about what is happening to the materials they set out in their recycling cart.

A recently published [consumer study](#)<sup>1</sup> shows that while almost all of us believe recycling is good for the environment, just under half of us say recycling isn't working well and almost a third aren't confident that what they put in the bin gets recycled. That number has doubled since 2019. Yet, that data shows that people are willing to take the extra time to recycle for a variety of reasons. Usually, it boils down to doing the right thing and saving resources.

It is true that for a period back in 2020 end markets for some of our recycling were bad, but they have rebounded. Every curbside recyclable, except glass, set a price record last fall or this spring. The average value of recyclables, including the cost of disposing of contaminants, has more than [tripled](#)<sup>2</sup> from a year ago and is almost five times higher than the bottom it hit two years ago.

Some recyclables do go to landfills. But they are the exception, not the rule. As for recyclables being shipped overseas to only be landfilled or burned, even before the recent supply chain shipping delays, the cost to export non-marketable recyclable

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<sup>1</sup> Suzanne Shelton "Americans love recycling, they have no idea how it works, and they think it might be broken," Retrieved from <https://sheltongroup.com>, 23 March 2022

<sup>2</sup> Rubinstein, L. (2022, March 1). *Latest NERC Recycling Markets Value Study Published*. NERC (Northeast Recycling Council) Bulletin. Retrieved from <https://nerc.org/news-and-updates/nerc-bulletin/march-2022?showyear=2022#mrfreport>

material was far greater than the most expensive North American landfills or incinerators. The emphasis of the negative recycling stories has generally focused on single-use plastics. But many overlook the greater volume of recyclables such as cardboard and metals that are used as raw materials to make new products and product packaging.

The misleading plastic recycling percentage happens to be [accurate](#)<sup>3</sup>. However, it refers to all the plastic that is generated, not just the common recyclables we place in our recycling carts. Plastic packaging is only 40 percent of all the plastic products that are produced. The rest is a wide variety of other plastic products including carpet, electronics, furniture, textiles, toys, etc. Most of these other plastic products are not recycled. However, the recycling rate for the most common plastics such as water and soda bottles or milk and laundry detergent jugs is at 30 percent. Yes, we can and should do better, but our household recycling programs are diverting considerably more than nine percent.

The success of recycling is reliant on our willingness to do more to reduce, reuse and recycle rather than just throwing it all away. However, we need to follow the established [Recycling Guidelines](#)<sup>4</sup> for our communities, and never place any recyclables in plastic bags.

If you have questions about recycling, waste disposal, or your waste collection service, please review [Your Neighborhood Programs](#)<sup>5</sup> on the [swalco.org](http://www.swalco.org) website or call SWALCO at (847) 377-4950.

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<sup>3</sup> United States Environmental Protection Agency, (June 2022) *Facts and Figures about Materials, Waste and Recycling, Plastics: Material-Specific Data*. Retrieved from <https://www.epa.gov/facts-and-figures-about-materials-waste-and-recycling/plastics-material-specific-data>

<sup>4</sup> Solid Waste Agency of Lake County, Illinois, (June 2022) *Recycling Guidelines*. Retrieved from <https://www.swalco.org/153/Recycling-Guideleines>

<sup>5</sup> Solid Waste Agency of Lake County, Illinois, (June 2022) *Your Neighborhood Programs*. <http://www.swalco.org/242/Your-Neighborhood-Programs>